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ABSTRACT

It is argued that while second language teachers generally recognize the value of cultural diversity, they may not be acknowledging and taking full advantage of the diversity within their own classrooms. A variety of classroom techniques to support multiculturalism are offered. One is to examine, with student participation, both positive and negative aspects of ethnocentrism and to develop an early respect among students for their own culture rather than focusing first on the target culture. Then the teacher can begin to help students move from a limited tolerance of differences to an appreciation of diversity. This includes exposure to a variety of manifestations of the target culture and presentation of a role model with enthusiasm and commitment. A sincere effort to integrate the student's own culture into classroom communication can also be useful in bringing students into the target culture, but the effectiveness of this approach depends on the teacher's style. Another is to highlight the usefulness of second language skills and cultural knowledge, particularly in helping students gain sophistication, to which they naturally aspire. Yet another approach is to make the students' own culture an object of study, encouraging comparison with similar aspects of the target culture. (MSE)

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Recognizing our Students' Cultural Diversity in the Foreign Language Classroom: How and Why

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Instilling respect for cultural diversity is often cited as a goal of foreign language instruction when we are called upon to justify our programs. This goal is important, intellectually defensible and honest. We devote considerable resources and time to fostering respect for the target culture. But what about the cultural diversity already present in our own classrooms and communities? Will students who do not yet see their own culture affirmed readily learn to value the target culture? This presentation will insist on the critical importance of explicit recognition of and respect for the culture of each of our students in the foreign language classroom. It will also present some techniques for taking pedagogical advantage of the cultural diversity exemplified by our students, drawing on that primary diversity to introduce issues of global cultural diversity.

From my experience among foreign language teachers, it is abundantly clear that the group places a high value on cultural diversity. These individuals have devoted a great deal of time and effort to the study of other cultures and continually strive to

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increase and update their cultural knowledge. Every year I see teachers devoting their free time and their money--both resources in scarce supply in the profession--to research and travel. Even more importantly, they do this not only as a dutiful contribution to the cause, but also for fun. Given the professional and personal character of foreign language teachers, then, one might reasonably ask why a presentation such as this should be necessary at all. Of course we value cultural diversity. Shouldn't that be immediately obvious to our students?

My answer, the one that led to this presentation, is that it should but sometimes it isn't. The first reason why our respect for diversity is not always clear to them may have to do with our obvious enthusiasm and admiration for the culture of the language we teach. As Kenneth Chastain pointed out some time ago:

> The attitude of the teacher is a crucial factor in determining the extent to which the cultural objectives are attained. If she expects all students to love the second culture as much as she does, she is certain to be disappointed. If she attempts to indoctrinate the students with attitudes from the second culture, she will most likely be rejected by the majority of her students. If she attempts to criticize the students' own culture, she may arouse negative, counterproductive feelings in the students. In short, the teacher should not insist that the students emulate her own affinity for and commitment to the second culture, as much as she may be predisposed to do so. (385-86)

He hastens to add that he is not advocating unenthusiastic teaching, rather, he says:

> The teacher's enthusiasm should not reach a level at which the students feel culturally threatened, a point at which they are forced to reject all or many aspects of the second culture in order to protect their image of the first . . . . The students should be made to feel that studying the second culture does not in any way imply the abandonment of their own culture. (386)

One of Chastain's often overlooked contributions to the teaching of culture is to insist on a subtler understanding of ethnocentrism. Say "ethnocentrism" to most language teachers and there will be an immediate negative response. According to many of our goals, program rationales and mission statements, we are here to combat ethnocentrism, a task we approach with the same fervor that educators in general direct against illiteracy. Chastain, however, argues for the good points as well as the bad in ethnocentrism:

> Each individual must make choices as to the desirable behavior patterns by which his life is most comfortable and most productive. In modern society, most individuals do not maintain in unaltered form all the cultural patterns of their parents; but neither is it possible for any individual to divorce himself entirely from his cultural heritage. (386)

In dealing with culture in my own classes, I have found it very helpful to students to make explicit the distinction between "good" and "bad" ethnocentrism. First, I present them with the statement

> My choices of food, dress, language, etc. demonstrate the results of a set of decisions, individual and social, that I believe are best for me, in my set of circumstances, at this time.

Is this, I ask, a reasonable sort of statement? What sort of person would say such a thing? Students typically come to the conclusion that the statement is not only reasonable, but is something everyone ought to be able to say. Next, I erase the qualifying statements on individual, time and circumstance and replace them so that the new sentence reads:

> My choices of food, dress, language, etc., demonstrate the results of a set of decisions that I believe are best for everyone, in any circumstances, at any time.

Again I ask them to evaluate the statement and characterize the type of person who might say such a thing. This time, they find it unreasonable, illogical, intolerant and rigid. As devil's advocate, I ask them how the second person could be so different from the first when only a few words in the last part of the statement are different. Their defense of their position is usually quite spirited--an insistence on the right of everyone to make his/her own decisions on such matters and the existence of a number of reasonable choices. I suspect that it echoes to some extent arguments students may have had recently with their own parents on clothing style or on what to eat for breakfast. The exercise allows them to come down solidly against bad ethnocentrism without the

teacher's preaching to them about it, and it also validates their own right to make individual and cultural choices, to engage in a legitimate ethnocentrism.

Beginning from the perspective of respect for the students' own culture rather than for the target culture is pedagogically useful also because it helps avoid the unintentional appearance of bad ethnocentrism on the part of the teacher. As Chastain pointed out, his or her affinity and commitment to that culture is open to misinterpretation from the students as a rejection of their own. Framing the ethnocentrism issue in this manner is particularly important when dealing with adolescent students who keenly want to belong and who appear to value cultural homogeneity much more than diversity. As teachers, we need to acknowledge their culture's intentions, seeing beyond its often all too homogenous (to outsiders) surface. From the students' point of view, their culture is divergent (from that of adults). For this reason, they can see bad ethnocentrism as a threat to their own ability to, for instance, dress the way they want--even if their desire seems to us to be to look like all of the other junior high students. Even here, however, we should be cautious in our generalizations: the phrase "they all look alike to me" should send a chill down the collective spine of foreign language teachers.

Up to this point, however, the message conveyed to students has been limited to tolerance of difference: my chosen culture is right for me--although others might reasonably choose differently. This is a very important concept and we must acknowledge here that this is as far as some of our students will be willing to go, but tolerance falls short of a true appreciation of diversity. To draw an analogy with music appreciation, it

is one thing to get students to admit that music with which they are unfamiliar might have some attraction for others, and quite another to cause them to like it. The former statement can be proven--the latter is a matter of personal taste and as the Spanish proverb goes "De los gustos no hay nada escrito." We cannot expect to cause our students to like a culture any more than we can cause them to like individual manifestations (such as foods) of that culture. Like us, students have the right to personal tastes.

Can we, then, justify going any further in pursuit of student appreciation of cultural diversity? Beyond the point of tolerance, are we only trying to impose our own (superior though we know them to be) taste on others who happen to be our students? I believe we can legitimately help students to further appreciate other cultures, to take them beyond "someone else might like this" to "I might like this," without simply imposing our taste on them. First, and most obviously, we can expose them to as broad a variety of manifestations of the target culture as possible. Most teachers I have seen are remarkably ingenious at this, and at the end of this presentation I have left time in hopes that some of you will share your experience in this area. Several principals have told me that they could locate the foreign language classroom or wing of their school blindfolded, guided only by the sound of music or the smell of food. For some students, exposure to the new culture is all it takes. These students are eager to try anything new and usually like it. They are active in language related-activities and clubs, benefitting even more from informal cultural interaction. For these students, your personal example

is highly meaningful. In fact, they not only want to emulate your speech and your commitment to the target culture, they want to emulate you. When students come to the university to major in foreign language education, they rarely cite abstract reasons for doing so--they tell me about Sr. Flores or Sra. McMillan. These students want to be part of our culture--we inspire them, and they in turn inspire us. However, they are not the majority. We are challenged by the rest of the students, those who might be led to admit that somebody, somewhere (the teacher, for instance) might like elements of the target culture, but who cannot imagine themselves doing so. They often see the students in the first group I described as "brownnosing" to use one of their more polite terms for it. How can we possibly lead this second group to an appreciation of diversity? First, I believe, we must come to terms and make our peace with the fact that they do not, at this stage in their life at least, want to be anything like their teachers. They are not part of our culture, and they prefer it that way. One response to the resultant gap is to try to enter their culture. Some teachers accomplish this very successfully and without losing the respect of their students. They are conversant on the latest music videos and they genuinely enjoy them. Students see them as insiders and such teachers can make use of this perception to introduce corresponding music from the target culture, for instance. Those of you who can do this know who you are, but it is more a matter of coincidence of personal tastes than a technique which can be taught. I have seen two teachers make almost exactly the same efforts in this area and one of them have great success while the other is a dead loss. You cannot force yourself to like the students' culture any more

than you can force them to like the target culture and they can tell when you are faking it.

What about techniques for teachers who are not "insiders"? We can begin by according our students' culture some of the same respect and research we devote to the target culture. Who are their role models? Can these be related to the appreciation of different cultures? This research cannot be done once and for all, since cultures are not static, but comments on the target culture from an interview with a currently popular musician may have more legitimacy for them than do your own. Observations about this country's culture from musicians from other countries who are on tour in the U.S. can also occasion lively discussions of diversity and stereotypes. In addition, we must convince these students that the appreciation of cultural alternatives is more than a matter of pleasing the teacher. One anecdote that has always interested me is a colleague's observation that when she moved to a new school the technique of lavishly praising students who did well and rewarding them with good grades to inspire the others had precisely the opposite effect from what she had intended. Not only did the others not participate more--the ones who had participated stopped. On repeated inquiry of one the few who had been the "best students" finally admitted that he was embarrassed by the attention and that other students made fun of them because of it. She solved the problem in a rather ingenious and culturally sensitive way by adopting a more "adversarial" style and framing her questions to determine whether students could "handle themselves" in particular situations. "What would you say if your car broke down in Mexico City and

you managed to flag down a passing motorist?" she would ask. If the student could not answer, she concluded "Well, looks like whoever is traveling with Paco is out of luck." It cannot have been easy for her to acknowledge that her own praise was a negative influence, but by admitting it to herself she was able to find something else that worked in the new classroom.

In many cases our students are waiting to be convinced that broadening their cultural repertoire is of potential benefit to them as individuals. On the concrete level, some teachers bring in employers to speak about the differences in salary and advancement opportunities between employees who speak a second language and those who do not. On an abstract level, one can capitalize on the generally positive value students place on seeing themselves and flexible and adaptable to new situations by presenting learning a foreign language as an analogue to adapting to other demanding situations. Perhaps because adolescents are so often uncertain of what to do, adolescent culture values the appearance of sophistication--of knowing what to do at all times. It is to our advantage to make it clear to students how our classes can help then achieve such sophistication. Teachers might begin by discussing corporate culture, for instance, a topic in which there is increasing interest among cultural scholars and one which often fascinates the general public--do they really wear only blue suits at IBM? Current articles on job-search and advancement stress the need for a keen sensitivity to the unwritten rules for dress, social interaction, body language, behavior and speech in the workplace. The foreign language classroom is one of the few places in school where students can be

taught and practice precisely those sorts of observational skills. All of the aforementioned techniques help to combat the perception that studying a foreign language is something you only do for your teachers' or parents' approval.

One last method of recognizing our students' culture is to make it an object of study for the foreign language classroom. I once assigned my students to produce an introduction to their university for an exchange student from a Latin American university who wanted to "fit in" as well as possible during his or her stay. The assignment prompted not only a careful examination of their own student culture but also a contrastive analysis of student culture in Latin America. I directed them to make certain to deal with areas in which differing expectations of how to behave might create misunderstandings. As they discussed (and eventually argued about) what the new student should and should not do, wear, etc., students began to be aware of diversity within their own culture as well as differences between the U.S. and Latin America. In the course of their research they found that there were aspects of Latin American universities that they liked better than their own as well as some they disliked. Therein lies the essence of appreciation of diversity.

Work Cited

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